PROFILE

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Paramedics for the Real World -

*First graduates from the Queensland University of Technology
Bachelor of Health Science (Paramedic Program)*

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Students graduating from the Bachelor of Health Science (Paramedic) program at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in November 2007, made history as they received the first pre-employment ambulance paramedic degree of its type in Queensland.

Described as a leader in its class, the degree program was developed by QUT, in close co-operation with the Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) to ensure students would obtain all of the practical and clinical skills necessary to become competent 'on road' paramedics, while undertaking studies within the curriculum based academic framework of the university pre-employment setting.

Queensland University of Technology – Kelvin Grove Campus

The degree at QUT stands apart from many similar degrees offered in other Australian States with the main differences being in a 12-week 'internship' and opportunity for students to work as casual student paramedics with the QAS. These unique elements provide students with invaluable patient contact which is necessary for achieving excellence in ambulance paramedic practice. The students not only study paramedic based subjects but also focus on a broad spectrum of health related topics with the aim of strengthening interdisciplinary health relationships. On successful completion of the program the students graduate as recognised 'job ready' Advanced Care Paramedics.

Students not only cover stream topics related directly to ambulance paramedic practice, but topics which cover a broad spectrum of health science and public health issues. It is believed that by increasing the knowledge and relationship within the whole health setting, graduates will attain the skills to strengthen and build interdisciplinary relationships, and provide opportunity to broaden future career prospects.

The clinical components of the degree specific to paramedic practice and the QAS are taught by experienced Intensive Care and Advanced Care Paramedics all currently employed by QAS. Many of the lecturers have worked for other Australian ambulance services and are indeed impressed with the quality of education and effort being implemented in this degree.

An important consideration in developing the degree was to ensure that paramedic students are sufficiently competent, or 'work ready' upon graduation, to commence work as qualified Advanced Care Paramedics. In addition to successfully completing the subject components of the degree; students are also examined on QAS specific pre-requisites, which include driver training, psychometric examination, manual handling, work related function testing and a medical assessment. These components are mandatory for all students to progress through the program.

The degree is the first of its kind to include a minimum of 30 weeks of practical work experience throughout the three years. Not only does this include 18 weeks (three six week blocks) during which the students work as unpaid 'third officers' but also includes a 12-week paid internship working as a second officer.

To date, this is the first pre-employment ambulance degree within Australia to provide students with the opportunity to commence working casual shifts as a second officer on successful completion of a year and a half of their studies. This allows students to practice their clinical skills while increasing their on-road clinical experience, both of which greatly assist the transition from university to the ambulance service. This has proven to be very beneficial from the student's perspective as it provides a source of income while studying fulltime at university. The QAS also benefits from this opportunity as the students fill gaps in the roster which would otherwise remain vacant or supplemented by existing staff as overtime.

The main unique component of the QUT degree is in the 'internship' which is undertaken during the final semester of third year. The internship provides an opportunity for students to commence (if not already working casually) to become employed as second officers in a paid temporary full time position. With 44 students completing their internship in 2007, not only in Brisbane but around the State, this demonstrates the excellent relationship QUT has with QAS. This relationship is recognised by both parties as vital for the development of an excellent level of education, while contributing the successful development of 'work ready' paramedics.

While undertaking their internship, students are continually evaluated by mentors using appropriate clinical assessment tools on a monthly basis over the three month internship period. These tools assess such criteria as:

- leadership,
- communication,
- independent decision making,
- clinical skills, and;
- professional practice.

Students also maintain regular contact with QUT during their internship through degree related online activities, and where possible, field visits by lecturers and support staff from QUT. During this period, students are expected to participate in online class discussion forums in addition to submitting assignments and case studies intermittently throughout the duration of their internship.

In 2007, students of the Bachelor of Health Science (Paramedic) degree were the first pre-employment students to graduate from QUT, and to date, QAS has been extremely satisfied with the standard of work and education demonstrated by the student paramedics. As QAS Regional Manager of Staff Development (RMSD), Far Northern Region, Laretta Howarth states:

“The students have exceeded our expectations in terms of their application of clinical knowledge, skills and abilities in the pre-hospital environment. It is clear that the Bachelor of Health Science (Paramedic) program is producing quality job-ready paramedics who are already proving to be a valuable asset to the Queensland Ambulance Service.”

The students’ final examinations include both written and practical components which are verified by QAS educational staff. The assessment covers everything that the students have been taught over the three years, including all QAS specific guidelines and drug therapy protocols. The practical assessments are evaluated by current practicing QAS Intensive Care and Advanced Care Paramedics overseen by the QUT lecturers.

As the first graduates from a pre-employment paramedic degree in Queensland, the students are inaugural representatives of tertiary education for the QAS. While students may have at times expressed feelings of being like ‘guinea pigs’ over the previous three years, they have been ambassadors in leading the degree program.

With the offer of full time employment at QAS to students who successfully complete the degree, many students have continued to work for QAS, while others have headed to interstate or overseas to work for other Ambulance Services. It is also anticipated that many of the students will continue to supplement their clinical skills in post graduate courses such as the Graduate Diploma that is offered by QUT for Intensive Care Paramedics. QUT is also planning to develop a Masters in Health Science in addition to incorporating the Bachelor of Nursing/Bachelor of Health Science (Paramedic).

Now that paramedic practice in Queensland has advanced to a tertiary educational level at QUT, the degree program will evolve and eventually replace the existing diploma program, bringing exciting times for paramedics and for the QAS as they work together through one of the biggest transitions that prehospital clinicians have experienced to date.

QUT has certainly paved the way in its development of a unique training program which incorporates all of the components to make a successful paramedic and a beneficial member of the extended health network.

The students who have graduated from the degree program in 2007 are happy to have been part of this historic event, despite the challenges of their study and training. However the students also know that the real challenge and achievement was in being armed with the knowledge that they would be able to overcome any situation in their future careers as Advanced Care Paramedics.

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